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SUBJECT: CITING H1N1 CONCERNS, TUNISIA "POSTPONES" THE HAJJ
UNTIL 2010

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Tunisian government has announced it is "postponing" the country's participation in the annual Hajj pilgrimage, citing fears over the spread of the H1N1 virus. While the government is not actually prohibiting participation in a legal sense, the suspension of the GOT's normal facilitative role is likely to discourage most Tunisians from trying to reach Mecca this year. The Saudi Embassy in Tunis told us it had not taken a decision on whether to stop issuing Hajj visas to Tunisians. Those who find ways to circumvent the system and undertake the pilgrimage anyway may risk attracting unfavorable attention in this police state. The government has for months been at pains to posture as a pro-active protector of the people from H1N1. Now, in claiming that its lack of vaccine doses mandates Hajj postponement, the GOT exposes itself to charges of poor planning. This move could also draw the ire of Islamists, with whom the GOT has long been at odds, but allegations of a political ulterior motive will probably not find much resonance, particularly if other Islamic states take similar precautions. End summary.

12. (SBU) On October 5, Tunisia's Religious Affairs Minister, Boubaker El-Akhzouri, announced that the government had decided to "postpone" Tunisia's participation in the 2009 Hajj pilgrimage, which will take place in late November. El-Akhzouri said the government had come to this decision because of the threat from the H1N1 virus. The government had ordered vaccines, but did not expect to take delivery until late October, too late, El-Akhzouri asserted, to vaccinate Tunisian pilgrims before their departure for Mecca. The Minister underlined that Tunisia was neither cancelling nor obstructing the Hajj, which was a sacred religious obligation. Instead, he stated, Tunisia was "postponing" the Hajj until next year, in order to safeguard its citizens.

13. (SBU) The pro-government media gave prominent coverage to El-Akhzouri's announcement and elaborated on the government's justifications. Saudi Arabia was insisting that all pilgrims be vaccinated and would prevent any passengers with a fever from boarding aircraft departing for Jeddah, reported the daily tabloid Al-Chorouq. The government was quite right to preempt any such humiliations from being visited on Tunisians, the paper asserted.

14. (C) The Religious Affairs Minister's statement constitutes more than a travel warning or advisory but stops well short of explicitly forbidding or criminalizing participation in this year's Hajj, a step which would presumably be seen as flirting with heresy. The practical effect of the move will nonetheless be profound, as Tunisian pilgrims normally rely on the Religious Affairs Ministry for facilitation of their visas and transportation arrangements. The chief of the Saudi Embassy's consular section in Tunis told poloff on October 9 that his Embassy had not yet made a formal decision on whether it would abort Hajj issuances for Tunisians this season, but he presumed that most Tunisians would not apply. Tunisia's quota for Hajj participation, based on one visa per

thousand citizens, had been set this year at 10,000.

¶5. (C) Some Tunisians will inevitably seek ways to circumvent the system via third countries, a tactic the government has also explicitly discouraged. Those who succeed will probably not be penalized, but Tunisians who have grown up in this tightly controlled society, where the very outwardly religious are under particular scrutiny, certainly realize they risk attracting unfavorable attention from the GOT.

¶6. (C) Comment: The Tunisian government has been very pro-active in taking defensive measures against H1N1. For months, the pro-government media has been replete with reports of new government initiatives to counter the virus in schools, government offices, and among private citizens. In claiming the lack of adequate vaccine doses for pilgrims now mandates postponement of the pilgrimage, the government now exposes itself to charges that it failed to plan or prepare for its citizens to fulfill their religious obligation.

¶7. (C) Comment continued: This move may also draw the ire of Tunisian Islamists, whose attempts to organize politically have been ruthlessly suppressed by the GOT. Islamists may argue this step constitutes another GOT attempt to curtail societal piety, like its heavy-handed attempts to rid university campuses of the hijab. Nonetheless, we doubt this charge will find much resonance, both given the Tunisian street's genuine preoccupation with public health, and especially if other Islamic countries take similar precautionary measures this Hajj season. End comment.

GRAY